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SUBJECT: TURKEY CONDEMNS GAZA ATTACKS

REF: ANKARA 2174

GOT OFFICIALS SLAM ISRAEL

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1. (U) Turkey has reacted strongly to Israeli attacks in Gaza. PM Erdogan has called the attacks a "crime against humanity," a "blow to world peace," and complained they showed a "lack of respect" for Turkey, which has been exerting great efforts to restore peace in the region. President Gul was more balanced, calling the events "irresponsible," while noting that he had warned visiting Israeli PM Olmert on December 22 (reftel) that such attacks would lead to regional instability. FM Babacan also condemned the attacks, though the Foreign Ministry Statement echoed President Gul's more balanced tone (see paragraph 7). Turkey's Directorate for Religious Affairs (Diyanet), however, added fuel to the fire December 29, calling the attacks "sordid" and a "shame for humanity." Parliamentary Israel Friendship Group members, including Chairman Murat Mercan and Egemen Bagis, who also heads the U.S.-Turkey Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Caucus, resigned en masse. In resigning, Nationalist Action Party (MHP) Deputy Mehmet Sandir said he "would not shake Israel's bloody hand" and "cannot be a friend of a country killing innocent women and children."

PUBLIC REACTION EQUALLY INTENSE

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2. (U) GOT remarks reflect, but have also contributed to, the Turkish public's intensely negative reaction to the attacks. Large protests were held December 28 in Istanbul and Ankara, where the Israeli Embassy was pelted with snowballs. New Year's celebrations in Istanbul's Taksim Square have been canceled in solidarity with Gazans. Leading Turkish human rights NGOs issues a joint press statement December 29 calling the attacks a violation of humanitarian law and a crime against humanity, urging peace and questioning why the attacks were carried out during "lame duck administrations" in the U.S. and Israel.

MEDIA STOKES ANTI-ISRAEL SENTIMENT

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3. (U) The press has further stoked public reaction, with newspapers across the political spectrum carrying sensational headlines condemning the Israeli attacks. Liberal "Radikal" carried the headlines, "Gaza Covered in Corpses," and "All-out Brutality Against Palestine" in their December 29 and 30 editions, with liberal columnist Cengiz Candar calling the situation a "bloodbath." Mainstream "Sabah" reported, "Dead Children Will Not Grow Up," next to photographs of four young sisters killed in a missile attack. Pro-government,

Islamist "Yeni Safak" carried the headline, "Like Hitler," and leftist "Taraf," "This Cannot be the Will of God," as "Israel violates one of the Ten Commandments: Thou Shall Not Kill."

#### A BLOW TO TURKISH EFFORTS TO MEDIATE PEACE

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¶4. (U) The Gaza attacks are seen here as a setback for Turkish efforts to mediate Israeli-Syrian peace; Damascus announced December 28 it would cease all Turkish-mediated indirect contacts with Israel. "Radikal" columnist Murat Yetkin and mainstream "Milliyet" columnist Fikret Bila focused their reporting on PM Erdogan's anger that Israel launched the attacks only days after Olmert visited Ankara, where he promised to avoid suffering, while undercutting Turkish efforts to advance Israeli-Syrian peace, damaging Turkey's credibility as a mediator, and giving the appearance of Turkish complicity in the attacks. Yetkin highlighted that Turkey, unlike Israel, seeks to avoid civilian casualties in its operations against the terrorist PKK. Israeli actions, he wrote, trigger allegations that Israel uses civilian casualties as a tool. "Milliyet" columnist Semih Idiz offered rare perspective in his reporting, cautioning that Erdogan, by condemning only Israel and making no reference in his remarks to Hamas rocket attacks, will strengthen the position of those who perceive a rising Islamic trend in Turkey.

#### ERDOGAN TO TRAVEL TO SYRIA, JORDAN, EGYPT AND SAUDI ARABIA

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¶5. (U) Government spokesman Deputy PM Cemil Cicek announced December 29 that PM Erdogan would travel to Syria, Jordan,

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Egypt and Saudi Arabia December 31-January 1 to seek regional support to stop the Israeli attacks and lift the blockade of Gaza. FM Babacan and Egyptian FM Aboul Gheit, in a news conference following their talks in Ankara, urged Israel to halt immediately its offensive, warning that the continuation of the conflict may spread beyond Gaza. Babacan expressed his "profound regret and disappointment" in Israel but also urged Hamas to stop its rocket attacks. He urged the international community to mobilize to provide humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians in Gaza -- the issue which PM Erdogan reportedly told Gheit, in their meeting, was the highest priority at the moment. Babacan also said all channels of communication remain open, including with Hamas. According to press reports, Babacan spoke with Israeli FM Livni December 29; Erdogan had canceled a December 27 telephone consultation with PM Olmert.

#### TURKISH HUMANITARIAN AID DISPATCHED TO GAZA

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¶6. (U) In a December 28 interview with mainstream "Aksam," Israeli Ambassador to Turkey Gabby Levy said Israel would "keep its promise" to President Gul and PM Erdogan to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe and has allowed Turkish aid to enter Gaza. The Turkish Red Crescent (Kizilay) has dispatched ten trucks carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza, which is expected to reach there in the next four days. Kizilay Director General Tasli said his organization has been in continued negotiations with Israeli authorities to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza over the past 15 days.

#### TEXT OF MFA STATEMENT ON GAZA ATTACKS (AS RELEASED)

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¶7. (U) BEGIN TEXT:

28 December 2008

PRESS RELEASE  
(Unofficial Translation)

Turkey is undertaking intensive diplomatic initiatives regarding the recent developments in the Gaza Strip.

In this respect, President Abdullah Gul, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ali Babacan conveyed our concerns and views over the phone to their counterparts in the countries both in and outside of the region as well as the Secretary Generals of international organisations.

During his contact with the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Prime Minister Erdogan stressed the need for an active involvement by the UN for immediate cessation of the Israeli military operations and the provision of humanitarian aid to the people of the Gaza Strip.

Foreign Minister Babacan requested an emergency meeting of the OIC Foreign Ministers to discuss the developments in the Gaza Strip on his call to the OIC Secretary General Prof. Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu. Secretary General Ihsanoglu made the necessary announcement to this effect.

The calls and initiatives will continue today.

Turkey also intensified its humanitarian assistance it has already been extending to the Gaza Strip where many lives were lost and hundreds were injured. In this respect, 10 trucks carrying humanitarian aid will depart from Turkey this morning. Furthermore, 5 of the 15 ambulances donated to Palestine reached the Erez crossing point between Israel and the Gaza Strip this morning. Turkey is determined to continue its assistance.

Our Ministry and Diplomatic Missions in the region are on alert. We are following the developments closely. We are also monitoring the conditions of the Turkish citizens living in the Gaza Strip. Contacts and preparations are being made in order to facilitate the launching of an evacuation process, should the circumstances require.

END TEXT.

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Jeffrey